

Deploying the democratic potential of Local Food Policy Councils

Various experiences of local food policy councils have emerged in different countries and contexts (mainly urban, but also rural), emanating from public policies, civil society networks, or diverse alliances. These are multi-stakeholder networks that can support and accompany agroecological transitions at the scale of urban and rural food systems, ensuring broad mobilisation of actors and citizens. The analyses and debates on these forms of governance and participation that we have been able to carry out within the ATTER project show that these councils can be an effective tool to better identify and respond to the needs of the population and address the key issues at stake in unique territorial contexts. They can have a real impact on the design and implementation of public policies and their democratic openness. They have a potentially key role to play more broadly in the operationalisation of food justice, food democracy, and the right to food.

Our analyses allow us to make some recommendations to deploy the democratic potential of local food policy councils, concerning the actors to be included, the operating modes, and the avenues to "reach" the territory and its population more broadly.

Introduction

The growing institutionalisation of issues and policies related to food systems raises the question of how they are collectively appropriated and debated in a democratic manner, beyond the traditional "closed" governance bodies. But most importantly, it is important to examine the links that can (or cannot) be established between these debates and the decision-making processes carried out by public institutions, at different scales.

Around the world, various forms of debate arenas have emerged in recent years at the territorial scale, in the form of commissions, working groups, local councils, or other multi-stakeholder networks. Among these, local food councils themselves are diverse and also go by different names depending on the country: food policy councils (especially in North America), food and nutrition security councils in Brazil, local food councils in France, among other possible names. This diversity, sometimes present within the same country, is reflected in the variable balance between stakeholders from different backgrounds (institutions, civil society, economic actors) in their composition, and in the nature of their aims, i.e. to contribute to the debate on food transition issues and/or to the development, discussion and implementation of associated policies.

Comparative work carried out within the ATTER network

ATTER is an international, interdisciplinary and intersectoral exchange network, bringing together researchers and practitioners of agroecological transition (19 partners from research, territorial public action, associations and the private sector), coordinated by INRAE for a period of four years (2021-2025). It is organised around an observatory of 16 case studies of the transition of territorial agri-food systems, rooted in five countries (France, Italy, the United Kingdom, Brazil and the USA). In most of these territories, food debate arenas and governance bodies have been created. We have studied them in terms of their composition, their objectives and functions, their modes of operation, and their articulation with public policies. This "policy brief" is based on a synthesis of the analysis of two cases of local food councils (in the USA and in France), as well as on a broader literature review (Nunes and Lamine, 2024).

Different functions and operating modes

The objectives and functions of local food councils vary depending on the specific national and regional policy frameworks in which they are embedded or in relation to which they position themselves. These functions include food strategy planning, coordination, lobbying, or technical expertise.

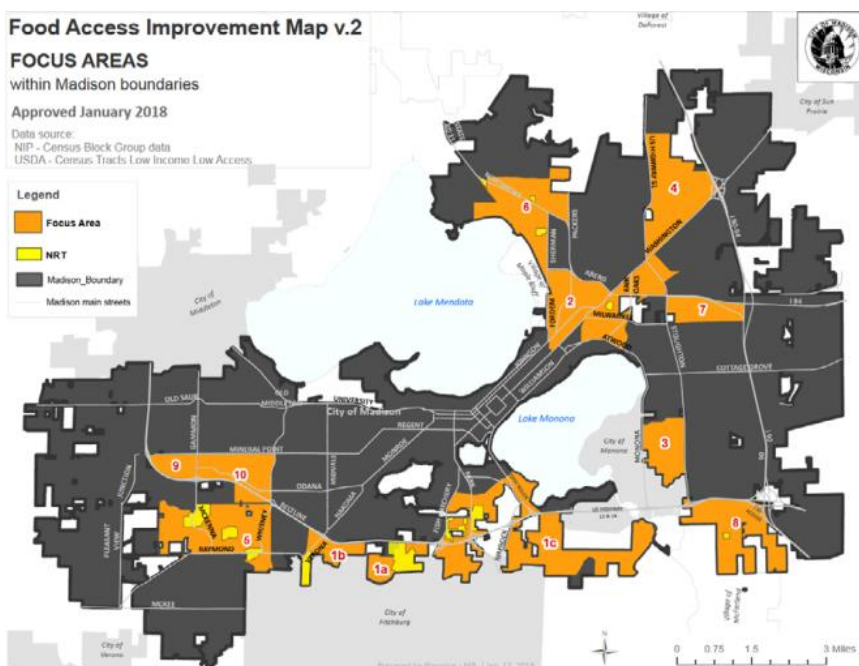
The first experiences of "formal" food policy councils date back to the 1990s in Canada and the United States. Often called Food Policy Councils, they are generally initiated and/or supported and/or coordinated by public institutions (such as municipalities or regional authorities).

In Brazil, some councils of this type are embedded in public policies. For example, the school feeding councils (in Portuguese, *Conselhos de Alimentação Escolar*), developed from the 2000s onwards, are responsible for the management and evaluation of the National school feeding program, at the three levels of government (municipal, state, federal), with a principle of balance between institutional representation and that of civil society.

In other countries, local food councils take variable forms, particularly according to their origin, whether more institutional or more citizen-based, but also their scale of work, and the issues and objectives underlying their creation.

Here we present two contrasting examples of these councils in terms of their origin: an American Food Policy Council initiated by public action, and a French Local Food Council initiated by a collective of local actors associating researchers, associations, and institutions, and therefore more independent of public action.

Food Policy Councils led by a city and a county in Wisconsin



The Dane County Food Council (Wisconsin, United States) was created in 2005 at the county level (about 2,000 km², with a population of 563,951 inhabitants in 2021). Its purpose is to develop a sustainable agriculture program, conduct educational activities, and work on the right to food. It brings together two administrators from the County Board and seven members of civil society in the broad sense (economic actors, networks, associations) representing the different aspects of the food system (food security, nutrition, urban agriculture, distribution, etc.). It is managed by the Extension's Community Development Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and covers a major food-producing region of the state of Wisconsin.

In 2012, another Food Policy Council was created at the city of Madison level (nearly 270,000 inhabitants), which is the urban and economic centre of Dane County and the capital of the state of Wisconsin. This FPC was created as one of the city's thematic committees (initiated by the municipality) and brings together 3 elected representatives from the municipality, 11 representatives from different sectors (school, health, etc.) and 9 residents (citizens). It focuses on issues submitted by the FPC members themselves and the "community" (both residents and associative networks), particularly around access to food, sustainable development policies, and logistics for the distribution of local products. Due to the interdependence and close ties between the city and its rural region, the city's FPC and the county's FPC often collaborate together.

These two councils are therefore institutional arenas initiated by the regional and municipal public authorities, and operate in a "bureaucratic" manner, both in their recruitment process and in their facilitation processes, as they use a parliamentary-type procedure to manage the meetings (with a formal request to speak, for example). Our analysis has shown that the two councils have difficulties in diversifying the social background of the participants and in maintaining the interest of people who are not familiar with the institutional processes and frameworks.

On the other hand, this strong institutional anchoring facilitates the implementation of their recommendations into concrete policy measures and ensures their funding. The facilitators of the city's FPC are municipal employees in direct contact with the mayor's office. For example, a detailed mapping of "food deserts" and key food infrastructure has been carried out in Madison (see figure), which has enabled the planning of future priorities to ensure accessibility to local and healthy food.

In order to support more "bottom-up" dynamics, systems of calls for projects and grants for innovative local projects have been implemented, which can for example finance community garden initiatives or food access projects. However, many community networks do not have the organisational skills or resources to respond to these calls.

A Local Food Council in Ardèche, emanating from an action research collective and open to citizens

In southern Ardèche (a small region representing about a third of the Ardèche *département*, and a population of around 140,000 inhabitants in 2020), a local action research project, "[L'Assiette et le Territoire](#)", launched in 2019 with various local organisations and actors (an INRAE research team, two civil society networks, two local public institutions), has led to a collective reflection on past and ongoing transitions. The key principles of the composition of the group were:

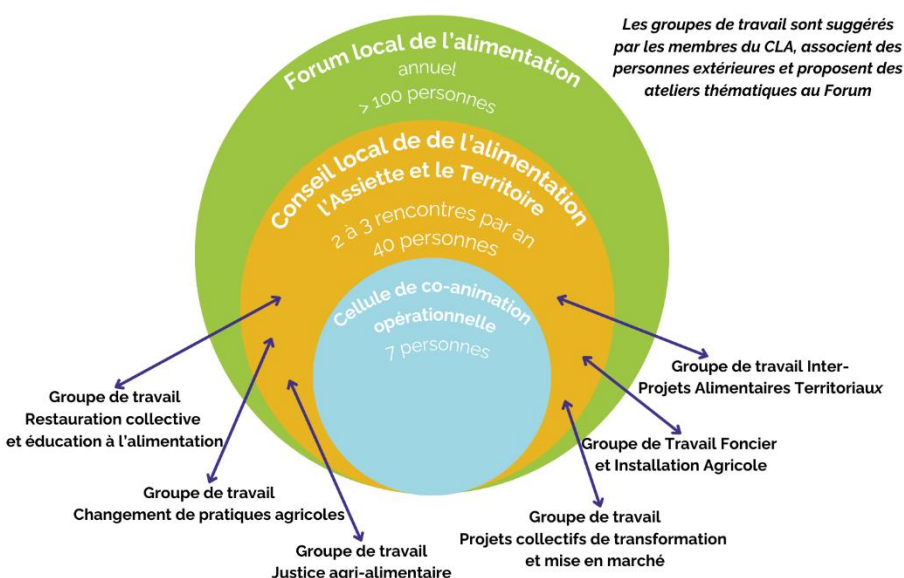
- i) to include both mandated actors (representatives of organisations) and "concerned" actors
- ii) to allow the expression and valorisation of the various forms of links that these participants maintain with their shared territorial food system.



This collective of about 25 people (who embody the different components of the food system) has carried out a series of targeted analyses and actions, particularly within various thematic groups, and organised a [local food forum](#) that brought together more than 100 people from different backgrounds in September 2021 and has since become an annual event.

During the project, the Collective drafted a [manifesto](#) "For a just and ecological agri-food transition" and collectively decided to form the basis of a future Local Food Council on the scale of central and southern Ardèche. This decision seemed all the more relevant as "Territorial Food Projects" were blossoming in the region at smaller scales (due to the national policy launched in 2014) and this council could both strengthen cooperation between these projects and open up a space for democratic debate outside institutional frameworks.

Today, the local food council has kept the name "L'Assiette et le Territoire", it brings together 40 members following an expansion process aimed at better including the diversity of social profiles and being able to address new emerging issues (for example, food insecurity). This was based on a collective identification of "gaps" and an open call for applications to citizens of the territory. However, the inclusion of people from disadvantaged or marginalised social groups remains a challenge.



The local food council is animated by a small group of people from different organisations (Monts d'Ardèche Regional Natural Park, INRAE, Civism, Pétale07, UGA-Cermosem), and continues to animate thematic groups as in previous years and a more open annual event.

The articulation between these three levels of organisation (a co-animation cell, the local food council itself, and the annual open forum) and their temporalities is what allows to maintain a grip on the emerging issues in the territory and a critical and constructive view on the territorial food policies conducted at lower geographical scales.

Inspirations and transversal recommendations

These two contrasting examples and our broader analyses allow us to make some recommendations for deploying the democratic potential of local food councils, concerning their composition, modes of operation, and links to the population.

Actors and composition

- Carefully identify the actors to be involved, ensuring balance (gender, age, social background, structures, themes, etc.) and considering the risks of exclusion.
- Ensure a balance between mandated members (representatives of organisations, employees, etc.) and "concerned" members (those who do not represent an organisation or institution), whether they are consumers, producers, traders or others, in the composition of the council.
- Ensure that disadvantaged or marginalised social groups are represented or receive support to engage, and that the issues affecting them are taken into account in the discussions.

Operating modes

- Establish operating and debate procedures to prevent the most influential participants from dominating the discussions and work.
- Build different arenas for debate in terms of the profiles mobilised, size, and themes (diverse or narrowed), with time slots and meeting methods that allow better participation from those less familiar with policy-making spaces.
- Use diverse and innovative forms of facilitation to share knowledge, collectively build analyses, express values and convictions through popular education methods, etc.
- Acknowledge that there may be conflicting visions within such a council, but that a common ground can be defined within and through the sharing of these visions, and plan for times of collective reflexivity as well as a charter of operation that commits the members in the long term.

Recommendations for "reaching" the territory and its population more broadly

- Strengthen engagement through different approaches and types of activities: cooking workshops, landscape reading, forum theatre, participatory mapping, etc.
- Create social spaces or events that are more broadly open to economic actors and citizens, to share food practices and visions of food systems and transitions, such as an annual local forum.
- Experiment with new ways to inform residents and citizens and allow them to express their needs and proposals within the council.

Resources

<https://ruaf.org/document/urban-agriculture-magazine-no-36-food-policy-councils/>

https://www.fian.org/files/is/htdocs/wp11102127_GNIAANVR7U/www/files/Module_5_FIAN%20International_English.pdf

<https://www.foodpolicynetworks.org/>

<https://www6.inrae.fr/atter-rise/Facilitating-transitions/Guidelines/Guideline-facilitation> Prendre en compte la pluralité des visions de l'écologisation dans l'accompagnement des transitions agri-alimentaires territoriales

Nunes K. et Lamine C., 2024. The blooming of local food councils across Europe and the Americas: insights on an emerging literature and its divides (*Journal of Rural Studies*, forthcoming).

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